

Boudjou a tortos! (Hello Everyone)

Walloon is the most important of the traditional languages of Wallonia, the southern, officially french-speaking, part of Belgium. The name of the region itself, created in about 1840, is derived from a linguistic concept (Wallonie = where Walloon is spoken).

Walloon was "born" between the 8th and the 12th centuries from the remnants of the Latin language brought to Belgium by soldiers, merchants and settlers from Rome. At the time, they called their language "roman". The name "Walloon" (with its modern meaning) appears in the beginning of the 16th century. The Walloon language is a member of the romance languages family and of the gallo-roman.

Walloon is a close relative of French - but should not be taken for a dialect of French, although it has often been considered so. There are - at least - three language levels in Wallonia: standard French, Walloon in its different dialects, and the local French (ie a dialect of French) which is more or less deeply influenced by Walloon.

Walloon is one of the languages that has managed to survive best in the shadow of French. The number of speakers fell sharply between 1930-1960. Today, although there are no large-scale surveys, the number of regular active speakers in Belgium can be estimated at 35-45% of a total population of 3,200,000.

In younger people (20-30), surveys suggest that about 10% say they are active speakers and 40-60% say they have a passive knowledge. The proportion of those who can read and write is very small. Walloon is not taught in Belgium, (except in a few voluntary and successful evening classes). The level of bilingualism is higher in the country than in the cities. There are still more than a handful whose main language is Walloon, mainly among the elderly.

The number of speakers has been shrinking, and so has the functional and social range of the language.

People saw that there was no social future outside French, which was the sole language in Walloon schools; all parents began raising their children in French.

Recently a movement began in favor of the Walloon language to promote its use, and assert that it still has a role to play in today's Walloon society.

There is no spoken standard. The efforts to develop a written standard are recent.

Literature is alive and well with new authors appearing regularly in several magazines which are almost all - at least in part - dedicated to literature.

Theater is still flourishing with over 200 nonprofessional companies playing in the cities and villages of Wallonia for an audience of over 200,000 each year.

In the media, Walloon is present on the state TV and on the state radio. Several French-speaking private radios and national papers and magazines leave room for Walloon.

Walloon is sporadically present in the church (marriages, special masses ...). After a boom in the 70s, Walloon music has declined, though there is renewed interest with a couple of rock bands now singing in Walloon. One of them (the bluesman Alfred) has had a lot of success.

Walloon is not present in the education system: teachers are not trained in the Walloon language, educational material is scarce, and the lack of a written standard makes it more difficult.

The main promoter of Walloon is the Union Culturelle Wallonne (UCW). The main objectives of the UCW are to promote the use of Walloon in the basic functions and levels of social life (in the family, for instance), while defending and coordinating theater, supporting the presence of Walloon in the media, the schools, the laws, etc.

Sources: Li Ranteule, Non-Profit Organization
<http://www.wallonie.com/wallanq/index.htm>

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